

Understanding the Forced Displacement of Refugees in Terms of the Person

Transformation

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Abstract

There are 43 million forcibly displaced people in the world, and they are categorized along a spectrum ranging from legal issues to humanitarian concerns for protection. Despite the complex efforts to provide protection to all those in need, the issues remain blurred and many fall through the cracks. The understanding of forced displacement needs to include aspects of personhood, and the example in John 4:4–26 highlights the possibility of a collective approach to understanding forced displacement as one that is rooted in the notion and importance of the person.

Keywords

cross-cultural, forced displacement, personhood, re-conceptualizing, refugees

In a recent address, the UNHCR Commissioner to Refugees noted the eroding asylum space in Europe, and he called for a harmonized approach to durable solutions¹ without compromising State security (Guterres, 2010). These comments reflect the growing inadequacy of the current approach to defining and addressing forced displacement. In Europe the issues are acute, and it is no longer sufficient to discuss forced displacement only in terms of the numbers who want to come or the asylum applications that have been made. There needs to be a renewed discussion of what integration means in European society (Crawley, 2005), and both the approach and the solutions need to reflect the permanent situation of a global world with refugees² as persons who are here to stay.

The confusion and complexity associated with forced displacement calls for the re-conceptualization of the term to enable a collective approach to addressing refugees as persons in a balanced and holistic manner. The current spectrum of forced displacement encompasses many kinds of people, including: a) ones who have an official status as refugees and asylum seekers, b) internally displaced persons (IDPs who have been identified for protection and aid), c) victims of trafficking and other vulnerable groups, and d) all those who have no status at all. While all these people are joined together by a common story of forced displacement, it is still unclear about who these people really are. This paper first gives an overview of the spectrum for identifying forcibly displaced people, highlighting the lack of clarity. Then, it explores the possibility of a more collective and unitary understanding of forced displacement that is formed around aspects of the person such as identity, security, belonging and relationship, as demonstrated in John 4:1–26.

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Introduction to the spectrum of forced displacement

According to the most recent UNHCR statistics, there were approximately 43 million forcibly displaced people in 2009. 15 million of these were refugees, 27 million were internally displaced persons (IDPs), and about 1 million were asylum seekers, of which over 270,000 claims were still pending in Europe.³ Clearly these numbers combine a massive amount of people under the common term of forcibly displaced, and they have been described as unprotected and stateless, alienated from their normal government or society (Schacknove, 1985), involuntarily forced to flee (Martin, 1999), and unable to return to their home area (Haddad, 2004).

I use the term 'forced displacement' in this paper to refer to the often violent or destructive accumulated or sudden pressure that compels a person to make a desperate move away from their place of origin in pursuit of a place of hope and safety. The study of Forced displacement is growing, but it is a subject not easy to define, and is best approached in a fluid and inclusive manner (Lewellen, 2002; Mason, 2008). The term 'forced displacement' refers to events and situations that have both local and global implications (Turton, 2003), and it has most often been understood and approached along a spectrum of legal issues at one end and humanitarian concerns at the other.

The primary role of the State is to give governance and provision for the security, subsistence, liberty and needs of its people, but when this role breaks down, those involved are often forced to flee (Bretherton, 2006; Walzer, 1983). The 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention definition of a refugee offers a way of recognizing and protecting people who have crossed international borders and it has become the benchmark for determining the legal status of forcefully uprooted people. This status refers to those who are outside of their national borders, who can substantiate their claim of persecution due to nationality, race, religion, or social or political membership, and who are unable or unwilling to return because they fear for their lives.⁴ This standard provides governments with the legal framework they need not only for deciding a person's status within its borders but more importantly for protecting the state's sovereignty and controlling the flow of people.

Defining forced displacement, at this end of the spectrum, does give protection through legal means focused mainly on status determination, policy development and addressing causes. It results in a narrow field of people who actually end up being protected (Crawley, 2005). As Haddad (2004) notes, the 1951 definition in today's global world is narrow, Eurocentric and individualistic. For all of the effort to give a clear definition of who counts as a refugee, mere legal terminology leaves many questions unaddressed and effectively millions of people unprotected. A legal framework alone is not enough to decide a person's status or to give protection, much less to address adequately the complexities of forced displacement, and as a result vast numbers of people fall outside the reach of law, forced yet further to take still more dangerous and extreme measures to address their displacement (Cimade, 2009).

It is not enough to define those addressed in this paper only in terms of the state or the 1951 Convention definition of a refugee; therefore, it is also important to understand the humanitarian and social aspects of defining a refugee. For the past two decades there has been increased awareness of internal displacement within states around the world. In 1998, the UN Secretary General presented the *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement* to the UN Commission on Human Rights as a way of raising awareness of internal forced displacement as 'one of the more pressing humanitarian, human rights and security problems confronting the international community.'⁵ The *Guiding Principles* were commissioned by the UN to direct the international community in its response to internal displacement. While not a legal treaty or document like the

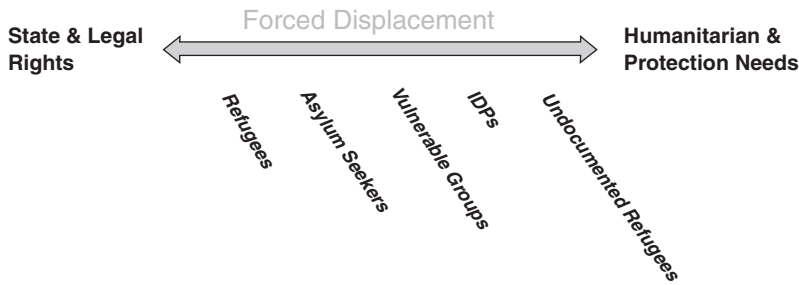


Figure 1. Five kinds of forcibly displaced people

1951 Geneva Convention, *The Guiding Principles* have gained authority and standing over the years for responding to Internally displaced persons (IDPs). They are significant for understanding the protection needs, because they highlight the vulnerability of forced displacement among IDPs, and the need for full equality, human rights, state responsibility, and special treatment of these people, not simply as recipients of aid, but as resources (Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies, 2001). While forced displacement from a legal perspective points to the causes that need to be qualified and solved, from a humanitarian perspective, displacement highlights human rights to protect.

Overview of the groups associated with forced displacement

The spectrum above identifies 5 kinds of forcibly displaced people.

- *Refugees* are those who have been granted protection under the 1951 convention or other complementary or temporary forms of protection.⁶ Those who can document and show they fit this narrow and legal definition of a refugee can receive official refugee status. Sometimes referred to as ‘convention refugees’, these people represent a relatively small portion of those who have been forcibly displaced.
- *Asylum seekers* are those who have submitted a claim for refugee status in a particular country and who are waiting for that State to decide about the claim. There were approximately 1 million in 2009 and 277,000 of these were in Europe (UNHCR, 2010).
- *Vulnerable groups* refer mainly to victims of trafficking and stateless persons.⁷ These are vulnerable groups who are similar also to convention refugees in that they have a clearly defined status (or lack thereof). They are also similar to each other in that these are groups of growing concern in the world of forced displacement.
- *Internally displaced persons (IDPs)* is one of the larger groups in regards to humanitarian protection. The term IDP was formalized in 1998 by *The Guiding Principles*,⁸ and it refers to those who have been forced to flee due to conflict, disaster or economic development. The key distinction of IDPs is that these people have not crossed a national boundary, yet they have been forcibly and involuntarily displaced. Unlike convention refugees, IDPs have no legal treaty or document to guarantee protection.

- *Undocumented refugees* are those who enter countries without passports or visas, who are unregistered and unauthorized and outside of official systems for tracking, counting and assisting. They are also described as ‘irregular’ because of their effort to flee using smugglers or to find protection outside and beyond official and recognized avenues.⁹ These persons may even have at one time been included in some other category along the spectrum, but who have since been forced to remain hidden, and they are extremely difficult to identify because they are mixed in with other migrant groups¹⁰ (UNHCR, 2009).

The spectrum summarizes five categories of forced displacement and, it demonstrates how easily the different groupings overlap, so that the status, protection and definitions all remain blurred and uncertain.¹¹ One weakness of this spectrum is that it not only overlooks some groups, but it fails to show the connection between groups. At any point along the spectrum, a person might no longer qualify for one category, yet will show up again under another; highlighting that these are people and not exceptions that go away (Bretherton, 2006). For all the effort to give legal status or to protect vulnerable ones, both the legal and humanitarian efforts still leave many uncounted and unprotected (Martin, 1999). The tentative nature of these forcibly displaced groups and the response to them, reflect the inadequacy and difficulty in defining the different groups: ultimately leaving gaps in the spectrum for a unified understanding of forced displacement. The reality is that many have fallen between and beyond the current means for understanding forced displacement, increasing the disparate situations, forcing people to flee further with less protection, yet facing the same threats and fears.

Efforts such as *The Guiding Principles* make important and needed contributions toward identifying refugees, protecting them against refoulement and offering them asylum or other durable solutions.¹² Nonetheless, the amount of secondary movement, for example by undocumented refugees who choose to flee outside of the official avenues, is generally a reflection of the inadequacy of the available systems for offering timely solutions (UNHCR, 2009). While some forcibly displaced persons are identified for durable solutions, many others are not, and the reality is that the process for determining status and the need for protection end up working against each other.

Personhood and forced displacement

As the spectrum helps to highlight, states are continually changing the way they define themselves in relation to those forcefully displaced. Likewise, the humanitarian response to forced displacement has evolved and changed over the decades and many aspects of this still need improving. However, it is in the persons themselves where the most change occurs as a result of forced displacement, and therefore, any re-conceptualization of forced displacement should root itself in these persons.

A brief overview of some relevant studies provides us with a closer look at what re-conceptualizing forced displacement entails and the kind of issues we face. First and foremost the re-conceptualizing of forced displacement should establish the initiative and agency of refugees as persons. Zetter’s study (1991) explores the interplay between the lived reality of refugees and the labels assigned. His study is important to the notion of personhood presented in this paper, because he joins the modality of the structures involved in forced displacement with the refugees’ own agency and ability to act and initiate. Turton (2003) recognizes the refugee’s role as well. He says they are most often viewed as trends waves and numbers, who inundate and swamp us, and instead we need to see them as purposive actors, with the capacity for agency and as members of our own moral community (Turton, 2003).

Second, any re-tooling of the terms will include the rediscovery of identity and meaning among the forcibly displaced. Forced displacement not only refers to geographic relocation with economic or political causes, but it means there has been a loss of relationships and the 'emplacement' in a new community (Haddad, 2004). Accordingly, Brun (2001) challenges us to consider the relationship between place and space and how this influences the meanings that refugees assign to their displacement. Instead of linking identity and meaning to the idea of place as a locality and space that never changes, we need to see these as a combination of multiple relationships and the way we articulate these (Brun, 2001).

Similarly, Kaun (2008) looks at the durable solution of reintegration in a typical eastern Angolan village in order to understand some of the basic factors at work in this solution, and he sees similarities to other settings, such as integration into a European setting. Successful reintegration depends on the sense of human security that is supported and nurtured by factors like local church communities that offer a source of hope and the space for socializing (Kaun, 2008). The concept of home emerges out of the experiences that Kaun describes, and these help to establish that among refugees, culture and identity are not rooted to a fixed place (Kaun, 2008).

Third, and no less important than any other revision on understanding forced displacement, is the importance of engaging with refugees as persons created in the image of God. We see this particularly in the context of hospitality. Pohl and Donley (2000) focus their work on the response to the issues, and they base this within the covenant relationship as found in the scriptures, pointing to a human nature in which all persons are created equal. As Calvin said, 'all men have God's mark' (Institutes 3:7,6). Bretherton (2004) further refines the view on hospitality to point out that we need to move beyond minimum recognition to a view that engages the other as persons. Similarly, Morschauer (2003) points out Lot's effort to treat his guests humanely and fairly. Groody's study (2002) highlights for us that we do not encounter refugees and immigrants as a *Tabula Rosa*, rather we meet them as ones who still carry the journey with them. The journey shapes who they are, and we need to hear from the refugees themselves how this happens and what this means.

These studies, which take into account a biblical and theological perspective on human personhood, show us that while we might recognize the complexity of legal issues and humanitarian concerns, we should do so against the equally complex backdrop of persons created with dignity, security, belonging and relationship. The notion of persons might seem to be an elusive concept, however, this is due largely to the relatively little use of the concept within the sciences. This is unfortunate because the notion not only offers a viable means for bridging some of the gaps we face in understanding forced displacement, but it is also the primary way that the forcibly displaced describe themselves. I refer to the notion of personhood to capture some of the aspects referred to in the studies discussed above, such as the need for belonging, life with dignity and security, and relationship to others. Above all, I refer to the notion in order to highlight the hallowed nature of humanity that in terms of the Scriptures has been created in the image of God. As hallowed persons, refugees like others have not only received their character and nature from the creator, but they also possess the ability to act and initiate, such as Spaemann and Zaborowski (2007) discuss in regards to persons who promise and forgive.

Clearly, the documents about IDPs, such as *The Guiding Principles*, acknowledge and build on the importance of these aspects of persons; however, the concerns should not be limited only to IDPs. Instead, the concerns apply to all persons across the spectrum of forced displacement. There needs to be a way to view forced displacement in a collective manner, which means that the issues are not addressed simply from one angle such as the State or protection needs, but rather they are approached from many angles with a view towards human development (UNDP, 2009), and the notion of personhood is an important step in this direction.

A focus on aspects of personhood recognizes first and foremost that the displaced themselves are not simply recipients, but they are important agents of change.¹³ These are people who not only fulfill the criteria prescribed for humanitarian aid or defined by states, but more importantly who characterize themselves as displaced, not so much in conceptual terms, but in the tangible efforts they take to respect, preserve and establish themselves as persons (Mason, 2008). Indeed, we need to put the person back into the term (Haddad, 2004) so that rather than becoming a victim, the refugee becomes a 'person of concern' (Van Arsdale, 2006) taking an active role to shape his or her identity and future, and to deal with the pain of memory (Naish, 2008). The displaced are not simply victims of persecution, having lost all dignity, but they are agents of and participants in their own destiny in which their displacement has forced them to make choices of whether to cross borders or not.¹⁴ By understanding aspects of humanity that characterize the importance of persons, we move beyond some of the blurred and one-sided distinctions that exist along the spectrum, to a fuller understanding rooted in the concepts required for a collective and unitary view of forced displacement (Mason, 2008).¹⁵

One important objection to the idea of personhood for understanding forced displacement is that it widens the spectrum too much, making the definition and term of a refugee meaningless (Bretherton, 2006). However, understanding the forcefully displaced in terms of their personhood does not make the issue too broad, but rather it makes our understanding deeper, by increasing our capacity to distinguish the issues and concepts of forced displacement and allowing those who go through it actually to describe themselves. Above all, the notion of refugees as persons acknowledges the importance of their own decision and effort as they engage in the solution process. Without an awareness of the human element that is involved it is easy for refugees to become politicized victims in the world, with a diminished capacity to determine their own interest and future (Pupavac, 2006).

Bretherton points out the 'bare life' that refugees have been reduced to in order to highlight not only the contradictions of the current systems, but also to show the need for institutions like the Church to move beyond humanitarian concern in its duty to care for the refugee as persons (Bretherton, 2006). I would take this one step further to say that the reality of 'bare life' among refugees is best balanced by a view of refugees as 'hallowed persons'. The state and its institutions are certainly the major stakeholders in the outcome of forced displacement, however, the refugees themselves are also important and a view for the refugee first and foremost as a person introduces an important angle for understanding forced displacement and the appropriate response.

Theological reflections on forced displacement from John 4:1–26

When Jesus met the woman at the well in John 4:1–26, he also faced the dynamic of approaching an outcast on the margins of society. The story in John illustrates how Jesus overcame the cultural issues and connected with her as a person. He met her on human terms, challenged her on a personal level, and addressed her spirituality as well. Jesus' encounter with the woman in Samaria connected with the heart by addressing issues that were important to her as a person. In one of the plenary sessions of the first Lausanne Congress in 1974, Ralph Winter explained the significance of connecting with the heart as it enables us to cross cultural frontiers. His point is very relevant in the context of a refugee diaspora in that, '...as we endeavor to fulfill Jesus' ancient command, we do well to be sensitive to cultural distance' (Winter, 1974). Winter made his comments in regards to the Great Commission and the idea of evangelism that crosses cultural divides.¹⁶

John 4:1–26 introduces the important principle of crossing cultural borders by approaching the person as a person. The encounter highlights theological aspects of re-conceptualizing forced displacement in terms of the person. The historical background of Samaria highlights the multi-cultural

complexity of the conflict-ridden relationship between Samaritans and Jews. While there is no reference to exiles in the text, historically over the centuries, the region had slowly filled with a mix of people forced there from conquering empires such as Assyria (Anderson, 1992). The key to understanding how Jesus overcomes the cultural divide,¹⁷ to encounter the woman on the margins of Jewish society, is to see how the unique parts of the woman's story fit together.

As John tells the story in Samaria, he divides it into three distinct parts that appear to have little relation to each other. Verses 4–14 describe the episode of water and the human need at hand. In verses 15–18, John raises the issue of the woman's husband and brings to light personal needs. And finally, in verses 19–26, John abruptly introduces the question of worship and the corresponding issue of spiritual need. By the end of the story, we see that the significance lies not so much in the nations that come to God for worship, but in the Messiah who has come to reveal himself to the Samaritan woman.

I see the connection between the example in John 4 and our understanding of forced displacement in the concepts of personhood. The principle is that like the call to the nations, giving legal status, or protection in situations of forced displacement, begins with one person for one person. Jesus connects with the woman's heart and crosses the divide by addressing her as a whole person in a threefold way that addresses her human needs, her personal life and her spiritual home.¹⁸ This sheds light on how the aspect of personhood can help to bridge the gaps that appear in the spectrum of forced displacement. In John's story, the commentators find a connection between water, spirit and truth (Brown, 1966), noting it is the same spirit that will forgive, baptize and give a new identity (Michaels, 2010). However, I believe John's text develops the issue of needs and identity through the concept of knowing. John uses *oida* in John 4:10 to challenge the woman, 'if she knew him she would ask for living water,' and again in John 4:22, to make the connection to true worship ultimately through knowing the Messiah. The action of knowing becomes the unifying link between the parts of the story.

While there is no direct use of *oida* in the second section, the concept is implied in that Jesus knew about her husbands. Similarly later in 4:29, the woman invited the community to come see the man who told (knew) all about her. The action of 'knowing' holds the John story together, and the question to explore in regards to understanding forced displacement is, whether knowing refugees as persons will affect their identity, belonging and sense of relationships. As one refugee walked away after we had spent the afternoon together, he said, 'I cry everyday when I think of my family and where I am and what has happened, but today I have not.'

Just as we ask how all the parts of forced displacement fit together and what the connection is between the different groups in regards to forced displacement, the insight from the Gospel of John illustrates the power of knowing and how it contributes to a durable solution formed around the concept of personhood. The understanding of forced displacement and the adequate response to this, roots itself first and foremost in the needs, stories and longings of each person and not in the exclusion of legal issues or the relevancy of principled action, but in the ability to cross cultures by connecting with the heart.

Notes

- 1 The UN has identified three durable solutions which are: 1) reintegration at the place of origin which is sometimes referred to as 'return', 2) local integration where refugees have found refuge, and 3) resettlement in another place altogether. These solutions have been established for responding to IDPs and are found throughout the UN documentation such as in the *Report on the Human Rights of Internally displaced persons* (Human Rights Council, 1998 Report of the Representative of the Secretary-General on the human rights of internally displaced persons, Human Rights Council).
- 2 Unless I refer to a specific instance, throughout this paper, I will use the term 'refugee' to mean all those who fall under the category of forced displacement.

- 3 These figures are from the 2009 *Global Trends* (UNHCR 2010).
- 4 Today there are 145 signatories and the often quoted words in regards to the definition of a refugee are: 'Owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or owing to such fear, unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.'
- 5 The Brookings Project organized and supported the development of *The Guiding Principles* which consist of 30 different principles for explaining the rights of IDPs and obligations of governments and organizations. The *Handbook for Applying the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement* (Martin, 1999) was adopted by the UN in 1999 to be used alongside of its own field book. See also UN Commission on Human Rights, 11 February 1998. Report of the Representative of the Secretary-General on Internally Displaced Persons: Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, UN doc. E/CN.4/1998/53/Add.2. Available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/refworld/rwmain?page=search&docid=3d4f95e11>
- 6 For example, there are over 4 million Palestinian refugees with legal status under the UNRWA mandate. The UN also includes 'refugee-like' people in this category and explains in the 2009 *Global Trends* (UNHCR 2010) that 92% of these people in 2009 were in Bangladesh, Ecuador, Pakistan and Venezuela.
- 7 This is a category that I have named in order to classify other groups of forcibly displaced people. Agreeably, every group along the spectrum is vulnerable; however, I identified this category in order to classify ones, who like the other groups along the spectrum, fall within the limits of my study. The UNHCR does not include any reference to trafficked persons in its Global Trends report, yet these too are displaced persons with a clear status. For example, Norway took in 2008 steps to identify victims of trafficking in its 2008 immigration act (UNHCR 2009). On the other hand, the UNHCR does include 'Stateless Persons' in its statistics as referring to those who are unregistered and whose nationality and legal status is uncertain, and although both refugees and asylum seekers might be 'stateless', the UNHCR classifies them as separate groups (UNHCR 2010). The two groups that I have called 'vulnerable groups' both at once demonstrate not only the importance of legal measures to identify and address the relevant issues, but also the difficulty and shortcomings of approaching forced displacement from a legal perspective alone.
- 8 See above.
- 9 As previously discussed, Cimade (2009) notes that the emphasis on 'security' by the French State forces many refugees to take extreme and dangerous measures.
- 10 The mixed nature of travel and the unclear status of these people may account for why some refer to the refugees in this group as economic migrants, illegal migrants and aliens, immigrant workers, etc.
- 11 For example when an asylum seeker in Europe receives a negative decision and the legal process is finished, the person is no longer counted as an asylum seeker, yet in many cases, they still face the same issues as before, and will, decide to flee once again to another country. These people are irregular refugees at this point, but they are also still 'refugee-like' which the UNHCR describes as 'ones who are outside their country or territory of origin and who face protection risks similar to refugees, but for whom refugee status has, for practical or other reasons not been ascertained' (UNHCR 2010). As discussed above, The UN reference to 'refugee-like' people states that 92% of these people in 2009 were in Bangladesh, Ecuador, Pakistan and Venezuela (UNHCR 2010). This means it is unclear if 'refugee-like' according to the UNHCR also includes the many who according to EU states do not qualify for status or protection, who therefore fall between the cracks, and have become irregular refugees.
- 12 Please see the first endnote for an explanation about durable solutions.
- 13 Weiss and Korn (2006) trace the development of protection for IDPs and connect this to institutionalism, such as found in the State, or with experts such as embodied by aid organizations, or constructivists

that aim to empower others to be agents of change. While they don't directly discuss their idea for re-conceptualizing the role of the State and humanitarian efforts in forced displacement, the comparison seems obvious and the idea ultimately lends support to my argument that the forcefully displaced are the ultimate agents of change.

- 14 The language of *The Guiding Principles* also puts the displaced person at the center of its concern, and although these address the specific displacement concerns of IDP's, they are built on human values that are relevant to others. The language highlights that these are persons with choice, who are worthy of respect, and capable of initiating and participating in solutions (Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement, 2010; UN Commission on Human Rights, 1998).
- 15 Mason recognizes forced displacement as the distinguishing factor among all the groups, but political interests and policy development end up shaping the understanding and definitions rather than scientific categorizing. She calls for an effort to bridge the divide to adopt a unitary study of forced migration.
- 16 For as much as Winter discussed the categories and methods of evangelism as was the trend at that time, he also reminded us of God's desire for the whole world to give him praise and glory in worship. We see this in the promise to Abraham that in him all the families of the earth would be blessed (Gen.12:3). We hear it throughout the Prophets and Psalms with reference to the nations giving praise to God (Isaiah 2:2; 66:12; Jer.33:9; Psalms 72:17; 102:18-22; 117:1); and we have it at the end in Revelation where a great multitude from every nation will worship before God (Rev.7:9-10). The scriptures give us a picture of the whole world joined together in giving praise to God. Here in John 4:4-26, we see this picture being drawn out. While other scriptures illustrate the call to the nations to worship God, in this story we see the Messiah come to the 'nations' in Samaria, showing how the solution to the divine plan for all of humanity begins with one person.
- 17 John 4:9 makes the divide explicit and twofold: a Samaritan and a Jew, a man and a woman. There is further reference to a conflict in two other sources (Matthew 10:5 and Luke 9:51-53) when Jesus in one instance is not accepted in a Samaritan village and in the other he instructs his disciples not to enter a Samaritan village.
- 18 Brown (1966) divides the story into two parts about the water and the spirit and truth in worship. He notes as well that the key to understanding the passage is to find how the parts relate.

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